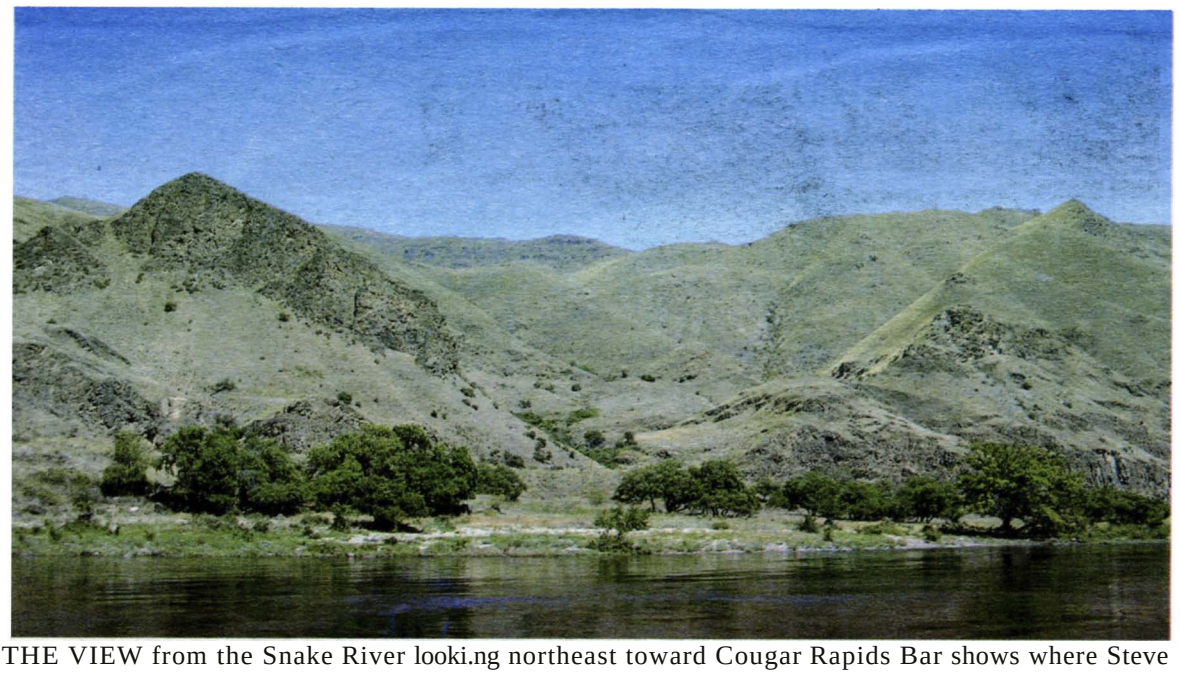


THE VIEW from the Snake River looki.ng northeast toward Cougar Rapids Bar shows where Steve Russell found the site of an Native American longhouse near Lewiston, Idaho.

Steve Russell Locates Lewis **and Clark Expedition Site**

Archaeologists believe they have found the Nez Perce Indian village where three members of the Lewis and Clark expedition spent two nights and one day on an ill-fated fishing expedition.

In the spring of 1806, while expedition members were camped along the Clearwater River waiting for mountain snows to melt, Sgt. Ordway was dispatched to fetch salmon from the nearby Salmon River. Historians have speculated over the route that Ordway and Pvts. Robert Frazer and Peter Weise took. But until recently, historians didnlt know exactly where the men descended into the lower Salmon River gorge and Hells Canyon or precisely where the Nez Perce village stood.

It was widely understood they left Long Camp near Kamiah and climbed up a steep ridge, probably near Susie Creek, to the Camas Prairie. According to Ordway's journal, the men crossed the prairie and descended to a Ncz Perce village on the Salmon River. But they arrived ahead of the spring salmon run. So the men and their guide, Chief Twisted Hair, headed for another fishing site and the Nez Perce village on the Snake River.

Steve Russell, a now-retired electrical engineering professor from Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, and former graduate of White Sulphur Springs High School, and an expert on historic trails, started searching for the route several years ago. He deduced the men likely descended to the Salmon River via a ridge between Deer and Eagle creeks. When they didn't fmd the fish they were after he thinks they hiked down the Salmon and then up Wapshilla Creek to the ridge of the same name and descended Cottonwood Creek. From there , he says, they dropped down to Big Cougar Bar.

The topography there matches that described by Ordway in his journal. When Russell flew over the site a few years ago he noticed some depressions on a bench above the bar. He figured that is where the longhouse, also described by Ordway, stood.

This year the archaeologists, led by Ken Reid of the State Historical Preservation Office at Boise, conducted a dig there. They uncovered clues that a longhouse did stand at the site and it was there in the right time frame to match the Ordway trip .

"The dimensions match what Ordway described and the context fits what he said about it," Reid said. "All circumstantial evidence points to it."

Reid and his colleagues found a handful of artifacts that tied the longhouse site to the right era. They include a small bead that is the same kind Lewis and Clark and the fur trappers that folio wed **them** used as trade currency with the Indians. They also found the head of a tack that early exp lorers and mountain men used to deco rate their tools and weapons. Also unearthed was the lid of a tea cani ster. The canister is dated 1822, some 18 years after Ordway would have been there. But it shows the site was one visited by white people and Reid said the longhouse likely persisted until about 1863, when the tribe signed its second treaty with the federal government and most Indians were moved to the reservation at Lapwai.

"The first 20 years after Ordway would have been the height of the fur trade and a lot of people came through here, "said Skip Miller, an archaeologist with the U.S. Forest Service.

None of the artifacts can be directly linked to Ordway. But Reid points out Ordway and his men only spent two nights and one day the reo And during this part of their cross-country journey the men where wear ing pants and shirts made of buck skin s.

"There were no uniform pieces or buttons to lose ," he said.

Before Reid and his colleagues unearthed a single scoop of dirt the historians used high-tech equipment to map the small bench where they believed the longhouse once stood. The map allowed them to surgically excavate the site while leav ing most of it undisturbed.

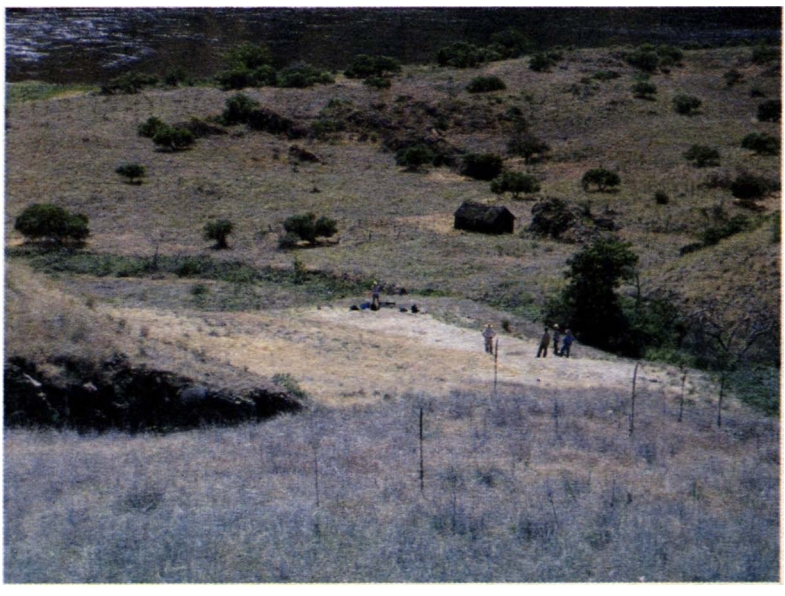
"We've been able to keep our excavation very low and disturb as little as pos sible," said Travis Pitkin, an archaeologist wi h the historic preservation ofiice,

The equipment measures magnetic charges in the soil and can detect whe re the ground has been disturbed and where earth has been piled. The high-tech tool s also measure the electrical conductivity of the soil. The conductivity changes where soil has been heated from fire. So they were able to produce maps that showed things like the out line of the house, where fire hearths were located and where artifacts like the tin tea canister lid where hidden.

"The whole goal is to take an X-ray vision of the subsurface ," said Ken Kvamme, an archaeologist from the University ofArkansas who specializes in the use of geophysic s. "It kind of give s the diggers more to work with."

While the archaeologist can't prove for certain the spot near Cougar Bar is the onc visited by Ordway, Frazer and Weise say the evidence they unearthed along with the topography of the sitc make s it a sure bet. That made their trip there a fruitful one.

It was more than Ordway got out of his journey. He and his men traded for salmon there but for some reason didn't cook the fish before returning to Long Camp - a three-day journey. By the time they reached the Clearwater River the meat had spoiled.



ARCHEOLOGISTS WORK on the location of the longhouse visited by members of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Photos by
Steve F. Russell